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By

THE REVEREND MARTIN H. FRANZMANN, B. A.

Professor of New Testament Exegesis, Isagogics,

and Hermeneutics at

Concordia Theological Seminary

St. Louis, Missouri

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BAD BOLL 1949

"I . . . communicated unto them that gospel which I preach."
GALATIANS 2:2

THIS report on Bad Boll 1949 is appearing late; but perhaps it is better so: a long perspective is necessary for a sober appraisal of the event that one has heard called everything from a dubious venture to "the biggest event in Lutheranism in the last ten years." A true estimate of the importance of the free conferences held between the Lutherans of Germany and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod probably lies somewhere between those two extremes; somewhere between over-optimism and the bleak pessimism that is dangerously close to unbelief, in that it doubts the efficacy of testimony to the truth. At any rate, the wide disparity of opinion reflected in the above two estimates points to the fact that this venture, new and unparalleled in the history of the Missouri Synod, needs to be better known, to be explained, pondered, discussed before we proceed to put a plus or minus sign before it.

Readers of Dr. F. E. Mayer's thorough-going report on Bad Boll 1948, *Building Theological Bridges*, will recall that the free conferences are not an isolated phenomenon, but are part of a larger program of spiritual rehabilitation in

Germany, a program consisting of physical relief, spiritual aid in the form of the distribution of theological literature desperately needed, personal contacts on the part of Missouri representatives with German theologians, pastors, and congregations, and finally, larger-scale theological *Begegnungen* such as were held in Bad Boll in 1948 and 1949. (The 1948 conferences were bilateral, between Missouri and the German Free Churches on the one hand and the German "Landeskirchen" on the other. (The 1949 conferences included the National Lutheran Council Lutherans also, as well as representatives of Lutheranism in other European lands.)

The first two parts of the program, physical relief and the distribution of theological literature, seem to be well and sympathetically understood. The last part, the free conferences, seems to be viewed with considerable reserve by some. It may be worth while, therefore, to indicate in this report, however briefly,

- a) What we went for;
- b) What we did and how we did it;
- c) What we accomplished at the Bad Boll free conferences.

WHAT WE WENT FOR

THAT a program of spiritual relief, involving contacts with the German Church at all levels, should eventuate in larger-scale meeting of theological minds would seem to be a natural, if not inevitable development. Still, the question remains: Why now and not before? We all know that for years there has been virtually no contact, and little desire for it, between the German *Landeskirchen* and us. The possibility of free conferences was seldom, if ever, considered. What has happened to alter the picture, so that a common basis for theological conversations and a hope for understanding could be found or presupposed? Much. Theologically, a whole heaven separates the German Lutheran thought of today from the theology of fifty years ago, when German theological thought was known to most of us only in the form of the antitheses in Pieper or Hoenecke. The old liberalism is, if not dead, decidedly moribund. Forty years of intensive Luther research, the ploughshares of God that passed over Germany in the form of two devastating world wars and the *Kirchenkampf*, and the monitorial accents of Karl Barth (this must be allowed the Swiss theologian, whatever the final evaluation of his theological contribution may be) have wrought a change in

theological orientation that is difficult for us here in America, where theology has passed through no similar crisis and the lines are consequently not drawn with such sharpness, to appreciate. The barriers that the old liberalism had drawn between us and German theology are, if not down, at least lowered and weakened at many points. The time is ripe for a renewal of contact: we have the common ground of Scripture as authority and norm and of the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of, and witness to, Scripture to meet on.

The meeting was possible theologically. It was also desirable ecclesiastically. German Lutheranism, wearied by a long confessional struggle under the Nazis and weakened by immediate and desperate physical needs, was in danger of losing what it had newly gained: its Lutheran confessional consciousness, its Lutheran individuality. It faced the threat of Calvinization. As our Free Church brother, Rektor Martin Hein, puts it: "Theologians and ecclesiastics who still wished to be Lutheran were largely put on the defensive. The leading theologians in the struggle of the Confessing Church had been followers of Karl Barth and claimed for themselves a decisive voice now that the Church was beginning to be rebuilt. It seemed as if Calvin had ultimately won the victory in Germany." A decisive testimony for Lutheranism, a strong word of encouragement,

was called for. That our Missouri Synod saw this need and acted to meet it, is to its credit, and we should thank the God who gave us the opportunity and the men with vision enough and courage enough to see it and grasp it.

WHAT WE DID

IF ANY ONE still cherishes the notion that the Missouri Synod's Bad Boll commissioners enjoyed a delightful European vacation, those of us who participated (proud as we are to have been so trusted and distinguished by our Church, and glad as we are for the enrichment that the participation has meant for all of us) can only answer: "Such a vacation I wish upon my enemies!" The conferences meant hard work for everybody concerned. We worked with a purpose and with a will. That we worked with a purpose a glance at the programs of the sessions will show. There was no toying with ecclestical trivia or academic dealing with peripheral issues. We centered our work on problems and issues that lie at the very heart of our Lutheran existence. Problems of Christian education, the problems of the Lutheran Church confronting the world of today, God's Plan of Salvation according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, these were the

basic topics with which we dealt. We dealt with them thoroughly and conscientiously; "The existing differences in important doctrines were not minimized . . . Here the theologians were really interested in the truth." (Rektor Hein.) One wishes there were time and space to record in detail at least some of the work that was done and to pass on some of the great things we were privileged to experience and to hear: the deep-felt and gratefully acknowledged consensus that we found in the great fundamental doctrines of Sin and Atonement; the long and earnest debates on the question of the inspiration of Scripture, where we were farthest from a consensus, where, however, the work was not done in vain—at the very least, questions were raised that will not easily drop down again, issues were clarified, the problem under discussion more clearly defined; the privilege of meeting men like Merz, who laid before us the rich fruits of years of loving and intensive Luther research; men like F. K. Schumann, who wedded the most scientific method and a disciplined exactitude of expression with the simple devoutness of the Catechism; men like Koeberle, whose Wuerttemberg piety warmed all that he spoke and irradiated all his theological learning; men like Gloege, who spoke with the lucidity of a perfected pedagogue and with the enthusiasm of unconquerable faith; men like the quiet and

unpretentious Schlink and Ellwein, whose modest exterior hardly gave promise of the deep, solid, and luminous learning beneath: those of us who heard them will not easily forget their words. Nor is the plain German Pfarrer to be passed over as a negligible element in the picture: his agility and versatility in discussion, his honesty and courteous forthrightness in expressing his opinion, his frequent flashes of kindly and illuminating humor, his readiness to confess his shortcomings or his faults, a candor that bespoke sympathy and understanding. Neither should our Free Church brethren be forgotten, who courageously and loyally testified to the truth that they confess with us, and what is more, did it winningly and with charity. It was a real meeting of minds and of hearts and of consciences too. A little incident may serve to illustrate the conscientiousness and the confessional bent of the sessions. One morning one of the papers on the subject of "The Church and the Churches" had relativized unconscionably the differences between the various sects and persuasions of Christendom, viewing them essentially as a variety of charismatic endowments, each having its contribution to make to the full polyphony of the choir of the Church Universal. Discussion that day had, for some reason or other, to be cut short, and the morning sessions concluded on an undecided and unsatisfactory note.

The American representatives had to leave that afternoon and there were to be no afternoon discussion groups. It was the Germans who were so disturbed over the unsatisfactory conclusion of the day's theological work that they organized a voluntary and unofficial discussion group for the free afternoon, to say the last word on the subject. The present writer was privileged to attend that meeting, being the sole American there, if memory serves. That was an unforgettable afternoon: he heard the *Wahrheitsfrage* discussed with an intensity of devotion, an earnestness of responsibility, and a deep consecrated learning such as he has not witnessed elsewhere. We worked with a purpose.

And we worked with a will too. Our daily program bears witness to that. Here is the average day of a Bad Boll commissioner at the third and fourth sessions, for example, those under the presidency of the Missouri Synod:

Our day began officially at 7:45 with morning devotions; the Missouri Synod delegation had usually foregathered for early morning coffee and mutual encouragement—no insignificant detail; the brotherly relations among us were an inponderable but incalculable factor of strength in the six weeks of intensive intellectual and spiritual work. Breakfast was at eight o'clock; sessions began at nine o'clock. In a morning session that

extended to one o'clock we heard three papers, of about an hour's length each, on the topic of the day, one by a representative of the German churches, one by a representative of the NLC Lutherans, and one by a Missouri Synod man. As the weeks went by, these morning hours came to be the most difficult: to hear, critically and with intent to discuss, so much theology every morning proved a strain as severe as it was unexpected. After lunch we were given a respite, usually employed in walks, siestas, conversation, or correspondence, until three o'clock. After the usual German afternoon coffee, the hundred-odd delegates broke up into four groups to discuss the morning's papers. The results of these discussions were summed up by the group leaders, usually German, and presented to the plenary session at 5:15 in the form of comments on the papers and questions addressed to the essayists. Discussions were vigorous, often avid, and the resultant remarks and questions addressed to the plenary session not infrequently the high lights of the day. The evening meal was taken at about seven and was followed by evening devotions. The evenings were given over to lectures, attendance upon which was voluntary, on the life of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in all its phases, motion pictures such as "Reaching from Heaven," etc.—in general, an attempt was made to give the

German pastor as complete a picture as possible of the life and work of our Church. Attendance was good, and interest was high beyond our expectations. That ended the day for the average participant. The Missouri Synod delegates assembled once more, to hear and discuss the excellent summaries of the day's papers and discussions drawn up by Professor Haentzschel of Valparaiso University, and to consider the next day's work. It was hard work, but we should do wrong if we were to leave an impression that our life was one of unrelieved and bleakly ascetic labor. We remember gratefully the kindly and genial leadership of Dr. Harms, the pleasant fellowship with one another, and the kind hospitality of friends like Chaplain and Mrs. Heuer of Stuttgart, of Dr. and Mrs. Steiner, and of Dr. Karl Arndt, which did so much to refresh and sustain us, both physically and spiritually.

THE FRUITS THEREOF: WHAT DID WE ACCOMPLISH?

HERE are, of course, no statistically verifiable results in an endeavor such as this. That in itself constitutes one of the values of Bad Boll: that we learn to break with statistics and 'results,' that we think, not in terms of parochial or synodical results, duly tabulated and presented for ecclesiastical accounting, but in terms simply of testifying to the truth and leaving the rest to the Spirit, who leads into all truth.

The reaction of our Free Church brethren has found thoughtful and cordial expression in Rektor Martin Hein's *An Evaluation of Bad Boll*, which has reached the desks of all our pastors. We need not repeat what he has said so well; we should like merely to call attention to his third point on page 14 of Dr. Mueller's translation, where he speaks of the peculiar value that these meetings have for the Free Churches themselves: "The Missouri Synod at Bad Boll served as a mediator between the Lutheran "Landeskirchen" and the Free Churches . . . they brought the State Churches and the Free Churches together for a discussion of their problems. It is, alas, true that in the past our Free Churches had only meager

chances of entering into discussion with the theologians of the State Churches. A wall of silence had been raised round about us . . . At Bad Boll we were able to discuss the truth with the representatives of the State Churches in a free and easy way. The representatives of the Free Churches . . . were consistently listened to with interest and respect. Now, many doors stand open, and new opportunities for discussion have been granted us. These should be seized with cheerful readiness." We heard similar heartfelt expressions of joy at the prospect of opportunities for a wider testimony on the part of the Free Churches from Praeses Peterson, of the Saxon Free Church, and Kirchenrat Schulz, of the Breslau Synod. And theirs is no naive or deluded enthusiasm; they are fully aware of the difficulties they are confronting; as Rektor Hein puts it in the report just cited: "We are not trying to deceive ourselves. We know the spiritual confusion prevailing in wide areas of the State Churches . . . We know also that at Bad Boll there was only the pick of theologians and pastors. But we also know that God's Word does not return void." And, to round out the Free Church impression of the results of the Conferences: "I therefore evaluate the conferences of theologians at Bad Boll as events of primary significance in ecclesiastical history. These encounters have no doubt become much more than

a mere 'conquest of geographical distances.' " One asks, If we have given our Free Church brethren renewed enthusiasm and strength for their confessing; if we have given them new and greater opportunities for witness, is not that, added to the fact that we were able to establish the personal contact so indispensable in church life and work with them after many years, a decidedly worthwhile achievement?

In the German "Landeskirchen" with their numerous divergences in history, tradition, and confessional status, the reaction to Bad Boll and the effect of Bad Boll will, naturally, be varied. That there were negative reactions in some quarters was to be expected. The surprising and gratifying thing was the positiveness of the response and the desire for further contact in some form on the part of so many in the German Churches. There is not room for copious quotation, but we submit two remarks that seem to us especially significant. The first is by Pfarrer Hagen Katterfeld, Assistant to Bishop Meiser of the Bavarian Church:

At Bad Boll the way which is deemed the only possible way to union in relation to churches outside the circle demarcated by the Lutheran Confessions was followed within that circle also: No union without doctrinal unity!

To the representatives of the Missouri Synod goes the credit for establishing clarity on this point; that is the service they rendered the conferences. For all other Lutherans were no doubt of the opinion that differences in doctrine within the circle of the Lutheran Church, a circle defined by the formal acceptance of the Confessions, could play no decisive role in the sense that they might hinder altar and pulpit fellowship or prevent union.

We were ready to testify by this course that the Lutheran Church is a Church not merely by the formal authority of the Confession, but by the authority of the content of the Confession and in virtue of a unanimous interpretation of that content. In the opinion of the writer this was of decisive importance for the inner course and success of this meeting and had its blessing.

The second opinion is that of a Pfarrer not given to superlatives or to sentimentality; a man of solid learning, historically trained, and of considerable critical acumen; a man, moreover, not in any way indebted to the Missouri Synod except insofar as an invitation to Bad Boll may have indebted him. In response to a request for a candid evaluation without regard to the feelings of Missouri, he wrote as follows, in part:

My somewhat critical expectations were in every respect surpassed. At Bad Boll we did not discuss merely certain peripheral problems of the Church's proclamation; it was not only an interchange of certain intellectual and spiritual experiences, such as is necessary from time to time among scholars and scientists; rather, one noted in all the lectures and especially also in the discussions the hot breath of a living struggle for the life-bases of our Church, a struggle carried on by brethren of like mind. This struggle surely is not without promise and will not be without blessing. The service that the Missourians rendered in this struggle is incalculable. Since you have built with such fidelity on the basis of Holy Scripture and are still so building, you are above others called and enabled to lead the Lutheran Church back to its living foundations. I believe that is not merely a private opinion of mine; in long conversation with the excellent Huebner I have ascertained that he is of the same mind on the subject. In any case you have very vigorously compelled us to rethink the Article of Holy Scriptures . . .

RESULTS FOR MISSOURI SYNOD

THE Church has but one business on earth: to testify, to upbuild. To do that is the Church's reward, and it seeks no other. But God, the prodigal Giver, gives rewards to them that seek them not, and we can see in this work done at Bad Boll in 1948 and 1949 fruits and rewards for the Missouri Synod itself.

All of us who took part in these Free Conferences came away with a renewed sense of our own blessings, a new realization of all that God has given us as a Church. We all of us had cause to give thanks for the fact that we are a free Church in a free land, a Church with nothing to build it or to guarantee it but the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a Church built and sustained by that Word and its power, solely and simply. A Church, moreover, free to preach that Word in a land where it is not only tolerated but respected and protected. Only a few of us had this realization firsthand, but it is our duty and privilege to pass it on to all of you, with the prayer that it may edify and encourage.

We came away from the first session particularly with a new appreciation of all that God has

given us in our parish schools. Again and again, when we heard the Germans portray the ideal school, an ideal to be worked for and prayed for, however remote its realization, it came to us, "Why, that is what we have; that is what we have only recently begun to value at its true worth; that is what we almost let slip." We were down on our knees in repentance and gratitude, resolved to tell our brethren what great things God has done for us; resolved to work for the continuance and the continued improvement of those schools, whatever hardships and sacrifices might be involved.

Two other things that Missouri Synod has, things we have begun to take for granted, were seen by us in a new light and appreciated at their real worth. One was the fact that we were all of us able to speak as one man. The unity and solidarity of our testimony was one thing that made the accent of Missouri an unmistakable one at the conferences. The other was the fact that the theology which we presented was a working theology, that it went directly from the seminary to the pulpit and the pew; here was a theology that had built a Church and was sustaining and enlarging a Church, an orthodox Church not wanting in love, as Germany well knew. As one Pfarrer told us: "I honor the Missourians. They say what they mean, and they mean what they

say, and they have a big heart. And, mark you, *der liebe Gott* has a good memory; He'll not forget it."

Not the least of the fruits of Bad Boll for us was the realization of our shortcomings, the realization, for instance, that we have not worked as we should have with Luther and the Confessions of our Church, that others have outstripped us there as in other fields; that our zeal for the practical has been a one-sided zeal; that here too we must do the one and not neglect the other; that if we are to be a voice in Christendom, we must constantly raise our standards of scholarship, not only for a few experts but for all, clergy, teachers, missionaries, laity—that it must be a real scholarship, no pale and shade-grown intellectualism, but the minds and spirits of men wholly dedicated to searching and seizing God's Word to us and to proclaiming it.

Another fruit of great value was the realization that the free conference is *the* means for achieving the Lutheran unity that all desire in a form that all can accept; that this is the one practical way, however long it may take, however "inefficient" it may seem: the free, unhurried, and uninhibited exchange of testimony, the conscience-bound and Word-bound freedom of submitting to God's Word together. It was brought home to us forcibly that testimony, though the testifier may be con-

scious of his own inadequacy to confess as he ought, is never given in vain; that God's blessing will rest on every honest syllable.

There are other results of value too, though they are less easy to record, intangibles not easily formulated or directly communicated, but none the less valuable for the participants, and so, mediately, for the Church they serve for all that: Contact with the bearers of Lutheran history and Lutheran tradition, men for whom Luther and Lutheranism is not one aspect of their lives but is interwoven with their whole existence, national and racial; contact with men who, whatever their failings, have hazarded their lives for the Gospel, who under Nazidom had been part of the one force that had met and resisted the total claim of the police state, men before whom one felt humble; contact with men the precariousness of whose present and future is forcing them to live eschatologically (in the New Testament sense), men for whom the present peace can signify but a lull, an *Atempause*, men that weep as though they wept not, that rejoice as though they rejoiced not, that buy as though they possessed not; that use this world, as not abusing it; "for the fashion of this world passeth away." They are men who see clearly because they cannot, humanly, see far; one saw the true nature of the Christian existence plastically portrayed in them.

Even at this distance one warms at the recollection. Surely, those conferences were worth while. Palpably, God's blessing was on them. We who took part in them are the first to be conscious of that, all the more so since we know the shortcomings and weaknesses that beset us; again we know, and are grateful, that His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Soli Deo Gloria

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